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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the process used to develop a study conducted by the United States Department of Agriculture of the nutritional environment of middle school students. It was decided that information would be gathered from school food service managers, school administrators, and teachers of middle grades who deal with these students daily. A focus-group approach was chosen to collect the data, and the services of a consultant were used to refine the focus-group questions. A pilot study was done with graduate students from the Educational Leadership and Food Service Management programs at a graduate school since these students were considered to have many of the experiences focus group members would have. After this dry run, the study's sample was drawn from 27 states in 3 geographic regions. The sample, recruited by graduate students participating in the study design, consisted of three groups (district superintendents and principals, teachers and coaches, and food service directors and food site managers) of nine individuals in each. Questions discussed by the focus groups, in two sessions for each group, addressed school nutritional environments, barriers to improving student nutrition, and processes that might be used to effect change. The audiotapes of all focus groups were transcribed and compiled to produce a report. Results of the study were presented at a workshop in October 2000, and the approved copy of the final text will be published on the National Food Service Management Institute Web site. (Contains 11 references.) (SLD)

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A Study of Opinions on the Nutritional Environment of Middle School Grades: One Example of the Process of Qualitative Research

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The Problem To Be Examined

The National Food Service Management Institute - Research Division at The University of Southern Mississippi was awarded a grant from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) to try and determine the issues involved in the nutritional environment of middle grade students in today's schools. The USDA has a significant impact on the nutrition of a very large portion of the student population through its school breakfast and lunch programs. Should the USDA want to make any changes in the program, what would the impact be? To help answer that question, an understanding of current issues is necessary. The rationale for examining middle school grades was that this is the age at which most students start making their own choices as to what they eat at school and possibly outside school. It was thought that should a change be made, this group would show the greatest long-term effect. It was decided that such information would be best gathered from school food service managers, school administrators, and teachers of middle grades who deal with this age group on a daily basis.

This study was to be done by holding meetings at three distinct geographical locations attended by members of all three groups to get a well rounded perspective from those actually involved with this grade level student. Each of these groups was to consist of nine members who were selected from lists of those recommended by their respective state organizations.

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It was decided that Focus Group strategies would be used to collect the data. The interviews were to be led by university professors who had experience in working with the groups. Thus, one faculty member from the Food Service Management Institute with experience in working with food service managers and two faculty members from the Department of Educational Leadership with experience in working with teachers and administrators were selected. Each faculty member had the services of a graduate student as an assistant moderator to facilitate the logistical aspects of the data collection.

The Focus Group Process of Qualitative Data Collection

One definition of focus groups which describes the process used here was stated by Cadleron, Barker, & Wolf (2000, March):

> Focus groups are small groups that have as their objective the acquisition of information based on the perceptions, beliefs, traditions, and values of its participants . . . Unlike other small groups there are no immediate end products for the participants in focus groups (such as educational objective, action-driven decisions), but rather there is a flow of information based on the opinion and interactions within the group, which is recorded and later transcribed and analyzed. (p. 92)

A review of the literature on focus groups by Valerie Wilson (1997, April) produced a number of elements common to focus groups:

- a small group of 4-12 people
- meet with a trained researcher/facilitator/moderator
- for 1-2 hours
- discuss selected topics(s)
- in a nonthreatening environment
- explore participants' perceptions, attitudes, feelings, ideas, and
- encourage and utilize group interactions. (p. 211)

With the exception of the total time-on-task, this study contains all of the elements of both authors' perspectives.

This focus group process contributed to the deepening and broadening of the issue surrounding the nutritional environment of middle grade students. It is this information that would contribute to the development of a survey instrument. A survey instrument based on the finding of this qualitative study's results would certainly be more comprehensive than one without the benefit of such results. In that event, Calderon et. al's contention that, "The use of qualitative research methods is not meant to replace, but should be considered complementary to, quantitative research methodology" (p. 93) would be upheld.

It is also important to note what the focus group process is not. It is not a group interview. Wilson's research (1997, April), led her to describe a group interview as "a group conversational encounter with a research purpose" and suggests that they "help to reveal consensus views..." "Both the focus and content of the interview rests with the researcher" (p. 211). By this study asking the participants what they thought the issues involved in the nutritional environment of middle grades students were, the researchers were, then, not responsible for the content of the responses. Therefore, this study could not be considered in this category.

Krueger (1995, November), in a different perspective, is unwilling to recognize those group procedures, sometimes called focus groups, "that are used for purposes unrelated to research, such as improving morale, providing feelings of involvement, conveying the impression that the organization is listening, or simple public relations." They only "create an impression of listening without actually doing so" (p. 525). This study brought individuals together from different school districts and no issues of morale were involved. Participants were encouraged to feel that their opinions could impact the decisions of a federal agency.

Since the results will be published by the National Food Services Management Institute and presented to the USDA as prescribed by the grant, it was not a public relations ploy.

The Training Workshop

To facilitate the process of both determining the procedures and developing the questions, the services of a consultant, one nationally recognized for his work with focus groups, were used. Three consecutive days were dedicated to the workshop. Three things were accomplished:

- A questionnaire of demographic information about the district to be submitted before the interviews was developed. Much of it required access to district records.
- The sequence of sessions and their purpose for the daylong interviews was developed.
- The actual questions and associated timelines for each session were developed.

The process by which these were achieved can be likened to what must go on in a 'think tank.' The interchange of possibilities by the professors, graduate students, and consultant was extraordinary. The extensive experiences of each provided a rich tapestry of possible issues and ideas. The consultant's experience in working with groups allowed him to "distill" the ideas into concepts that resulted in questions that a focus group could deal with effectively. Without his objectivity and sense of focus group dynamics, it would probably have taken us a great deal more time and we possibly may not have been so precise.

It was decided that the morning session would consist of three groups of nine members of the same designation: teacher, administrator, or food service director. The process to be used would be that of posing a number of questions and allowing the group to address the questions as they saw fit. During lunch, the principal issues elicited by the

questions from all three groups were then complied. The five most common concerns were then selected to be the center of the afternoon's questions. The afternoon questions dealt with how these issues could be addressed to improve the nutritional environment of middle grade students. For this session, teachers, administrators, and food service director would be mixed. This was to allow members of each group to interact in arriving at solutions.

The professors were to serve as the moderators. Their function was to:

1) Make sure the group stayed on task. Should they wander, it was their responsibility to bring them back to the question under consideration.
2) Make sure each member participated. Input from all was a necessity.
3) Prompt them in such a way as to get as complete (rich) an answer as possible.
4) Make sure timelines were followed. The schedule had to be maintained to make sure all issues (questions) were addressed by all groups.
5) Maintain impartiality, no matter which direction the conversation took. The purpose of the session was to get participants' opinions without any influence from the moderator.

Given that there was access to only one day of each group's time, there would be no going back to address unfinished business. All questions had to have responses. In this way, the data from the three sites would be comparable.

The Pilot

In order to perfect the instrument and practice the process, a pilot study was done. Graduate students from the Educational Leadership and Food Service Management programs at USM were enlisted. The members of these groups possessed a number of the experiences that the focus groups were expected to have, thus they could make a significant contribution to the project. On one occasion when classes for both groups met, the Food Service Management Institute provided three classrooms and a common room with refreshments.

The graduate students were separated into the three groups. The time period for each question was compressed. The rotation from homogeneous to heterogeneous groups was applied. The recording equipment for all three rooms was used. The role the graduate students (assistant moderators) were to play during the meetings was practiced. Moderators gained experience in the difficult task of maintaining a neutral status as group members presented their positions.

Upon completion of the pilot, the graduate students were asked their reaction to both the questions and the way in which the group dynamics were practiced. Combined with the input from the researchers, this information brought about a few minor changes in the phrasing of some of the questions.

The research team found this "dry run" extremely valuable in preparing its members for the actual meetings. The training was important, but facing people and practicing the various roles contributed greatly to the consistency with which the data were to be collected in the meetings.

Selection and Recruitment of Participants

The study's sample was drawn from twenty-seven states, divided into three geographical regions, the East, West, and mid-America. This sample was then further divided into three separate and distinct focus groups of nine individuals with the first group comprising district superintendents and principals, the second group containing teachers and coaches, and the third groups consisting of food service directors and food service site managers.

The three graduate students retained as assistant moderators were assigned the task of recruiting the participants for this study. Each graduate student was assigned the

responsibility of recruiting either superintendents/principals, teachers/coaches, or food service managers/directors for all three regional locations: Kansas City, MO; Las Vegas, NV; and Reston, VA. State directors of child nutrition programs were contacted to solicit names of food service managers and school district nutrition directors with the ability to speak to issues related to eating behaviors of students in grades 5-9 and who were available to participate in this study. The state associations for school administrators and teachers were contacted to solicit suggestions for superintendents/principals and teachers/coaches.

Once a potential participant's name and contact information had been obtained from the previously mentioned sources, the assistant moderator contacted the potential participant and explained that his/her name had been suggested as a possible candidate to participate in a national study conducted by the USDA. The assistant moderator briefly explained the importance of the study and requested that the candidate consider potential involvement in the study. In order to recruit these already busy candidates, it was necessary to explain to them various benefits and incentives they might receive by participating. Although a stipend was not available to compensate them for their time, it was explained that they would have an opportunity to: (a) have their opinions possibly impact an important national research project; (b) build relationships with professionals in their geographical region (network); and (c) travel with all expenses paid to the regional site.

One assistant moderator reported an incident of disbelief on the part of one candidate from a Western state. Upon informing him over the telephone that his name had been submitted as a possible participant in a national study conducted by the USDA and that all trip-related expenses would be covered for the session to be held in Las Vegas, he responded, "This is a joke…right? Who put you up to this?" With further assurances of the offer's

credibility, this candidate agreed to accept the invitation and then share his thoughts at the regional focus group.

The Focus Group Sessions

The research team consisted of three pairs of moderators and assistant moderators. There were two rounds of focus groups conducted at each site location. These sessions utilized a series of questions that were developed in the workshop for this study to assess the perceptions of the participants. The questions addressed issues pertinent to the actual school nutritional environment, barriers to improving the school nutrition environment, and processes that might be used to affect change. The purpose of using principals and superintendents, teachers and coaches, and food service managers and district school nutrition directors was that they were people who play significant roles of the middle school environment.

The focus group sessions began in the morning with a general session and an introduction to all groups as to the objectives for the sessions, what time frames were involved, and to answer any questions the participants may have had. The participants were then assigned to their homogeneous groups (superintendents/principal, teachers/coaches, and food service managers/district food service directors) with one moderator and one assistant moderator and began the one and one-half hour morning focus group discussions. Three simultaneous discussions were held in an attempt to ascertain the similarities and differences in the perceptions held by the groups of nine members. Each focus group's interactions were tape recorded. In addition, notes were taken by the assistant moderator to capture all important and relevant data.

In an effort to create an open, warm, and friendly environment, each morning and afternoon focus session began with (a) a welcome, (b) an overview of the topic, (c) the ground rules, and (d) a personal preference question to help break the ice. The morning interview process consisted of a set of eleven questions that were posed by the moderator. These questions were clear, short, open-ended, and allowed the participants to talk freely about their experiences and opinions associated with the middle school nutritional environment.

Each participant in the sessions was encouraged to share his or her opinions throughout the discussions. The moderators' role was to present each question to the group for discussion and then to unobtrusively facilitate the acquisition of information while keeping the group focused and productive in the permissive environment. The assistant moderators' role was not to participate but rather to welcome participants as they arrived, take careful notes, monitor the recording equipment during the discussions, ask questions when invited, and provide a brief oral summary at the conclusion of the session. Following the summary, the question was asked if anything had been missed. The participants were then thanked and dismissed for lunch.

After the conclusion of the morning sessions, there was a buffet style lunch provided to all the participants in an attempt to encourage them to further discuss the morning's topics with each other and the research team. While the participants were having lunch, the research team had a work session to discuss the morning sessions' outcomes, organize the afternoon sessions' topics, and rearrange the personnel into heterogeneous groups. It was important that all groups had representatives from each of the three groups and had a mix of personalities: dominant, shy, and ramblers.

The afternoon focus groups consisted of one and one-half hour sessions. The discussion questions were designed to explore two issues: (a) possible discrepancies between the responses of the mornings' homogeneous groups and (b) strategies for improving the school nutritional environment. The afternoon sessions followed the same format as the morning sessions with a welcome, overview of the topic, ground rules (participants were facing new moderators), and the five questions. The moderators presented the five afternoon questions, facilitated the conversation by not allowing any one individual to dominate, and attempted to involve all participants. At the conclusion of the afternoon session, the moderator summarized the discussion, reviewed the purpose, and asked if anything had been missed. The moderator thanked the participants and dismissed them so that they could join a concluding general session.

At the concluding afternoon session, each moderator made a statement as to the key points that came out of their meeting. In this way, everyone came away with at least a peripheral understanding of what the process they had just undergone had produced. For most, the other moderators' comments supported that occurred in their groups with an occasional variation. The participants received a certificate of appreciation from the National Food Service Management Institute. Before dismissing for the day, questions such as when and how the final report would be available and whether a list of e-mail addresses of participants for future communication could be made available were answered.

After the participants departed, the research team discussed outcomes, possibilities, and any possible improvements before concluding.

Compiling and Analyzing the Data

The audio tape recordings of all sessions were transcribed. Hard copies of the three sites' sessions were printed on colored paper to identify comments with sites. Each pair of researchers, professor and their graduate assistant, was asked to first separate the comments from the sessions they had supervised. They then grouped related comments on the strips of paper on large poster board with a descriptive label for each group. This time-consuming task involved the sorting of more than fifteen hours of taped comments per research team. Although all comments were considered, some were deemed "off the issue" and were not included.

The next step was the assemblage of the three teams' compellations. The labeling of the comment groups made this task significantly easier than the first. The color-coding of the comments led to several regional generalizations becoming apparent.

The final task of producing the report from the demographic survey and accumulated comments fell to the researcher from the Food Service Management Institute, the organization that received the grant. A twenty-five page report was submitted to each of the research teams for comments and suggestions. Each team had an opportunity to sit down and share their perceptions of the report before the final draft was completed.

Presentation of Results

The results of this study were presented during an October 2000 workshop on school environment sponsored by the USDA in Washington, DC. Upon final approval of the text, this study will be published on The National Food Service Management Institute's web site: [www.NFSMI.org].

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